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SUBJECT: INDIA: CELEBRATING WOMEN IN SCIENCE, NOT YET EQUAL

REF: A. 09 NewDelhi 544

[B](#). 09 Mumbai 140

[C](#). 09 Mumbai 142

[1](#). SUMMARY: More than 60 attendees from a variety of backgrounds discussed India's climate for women scientists during an Embassy Environment, Science and Technology (EST) Office-hosted "Celebrating Women in Science" workshop. Women scientists in India are every bit as intelligent and hard working as their male counterparts, but seldom reach the senior ranks and face significant obstacles - primarily cultural and organizational - to achieving success in India. The women in science are ready to do something about it, and are looking for assistance to figure out how. Mission is exploring programming options and welcomes Department suggestions. END SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

[2](#). After visiting laboratories and universities across India and attending conferences for the past year, ESTOff noticed a troubling phenomenon: Indian women scientists were either not present or significantly underrepresented. This was particularly apparent across disciplines in senior scientific positions and in government institutions, although somewhat less so in Indian commercial pharma and biotechnology firms where there are more women executives and senior scientists. The EST office decided to host an event celebrating women scientists to try to understand the environment in which they work and what it took for them to become successful.

[3](#). The 19 August workshop brought together women from a broad cross section of specialties and experience levels, including scientists with policy and advocacy roles, science educators, researchers working in industry, defense, agriculture, conservation, astronomy, physics, nutrition and pharmaceuticals. University students and students in grades 9-12 with an interest in science also participated. The diverse group of attendees provided a broad view of the Indian science environment and also created an atmosphere conducive to generating new ideas and creating new networks.

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

14. In addition to gender, participants pointed to caste, the rural versus urban divide, and the availability of state government programs as key factors in determining opportunities in science. Participants were not looking for a "reservation" or quota system but instead believed that women should be better integrated into the existing system and that merit, not gender, should be the main criteria for selection and opportunity. They noted that women currently are not even on the platform where decisions are made and male-run inner circles do not give women the same opportunities as equally or less qualified men. Though the workshop attendees were diverse, their observations on obstacles to success were almost universally held. Following are highlights from the workshop:

-- Although no laws or official policies explicitly prohibit women from entering or advancing in science, Indian women are expected to place family considerations above all others. Moreover, social and cultural restrictions create work environments that prevent women from rising to the senior ranks, particularly in government and education organizations. Former Secretary of Biotechnology Dr. Manju Sharma and Dr. Neelam Kumar, author of "Women in Science in India" and a scientist at the National Institute of Science Technology and Development Studies, indicated that women are consistently compensated less than their male counterparts, sometimes by as much as half. There is a generally held presumption that women cannot do the job, though studies show that there are no differences in ability between the sexes and women often are more productive than men in the same positions. Many of the participants noted they felt the need to be twice as good and work twice as hard as their male colleagues to be taken seriously. Participants gave anecdotal accounts, both during the group discussion and in private

NEW DELHI 00001874 002 OF 003

conversations with ESTOff after the workshop, of feeling guilty about getting promotions as their male colleagues were resentful, jealous, and made derogatory and spiteful comments about their performance in the workplace.

-- Senior policy makers give lip service to advancing the rights of women, but do not follow through with hiring more women into the senior ranks or demanding and enforcing equal treatment. According to data provided by Dr. Kumar, only 10.2 percent of the total research & development personnel in India are women; and neither the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, a key government science research organization, nor any of its 37 institutes have ever been headed by a woman. University Grants Commission statistics show that only 11 percent of vice chancellors in Indian universities are women, and of this 5-6 percent are in women-only universities where a woman chancellor is mandatory. Participants urged that S&T leaders in the Ministries, government institutes and schools be held accountable for creating a level playing field and bringing more qualified women into the ranks of senior scientists, educators and S&T policy advisors. For this to happen, a significant social and cultural shift needs to take place.

-- There is little flexibility in scientific careers in India. The Indian scientific establishment tends to be rigidly stove-piped with scientists often spending their entire careers climbing the ladder within a single institution. This organizational structure offers little or no consideration for work-life balance. Those who take time off for family often find they are not welcome back in the workplace, and that there are no opportunities for part-time work, flexible hours or work-based childcare facilities to accommodate family demands. Nor are there opportunities for lateral movement between research, policy or advocacy organizations. Scientists who wish to move to related career fields or to go back to school are hindered by age or other policy restrictions.

-- Several state and central government programs designed to provide science instruction exist for girls and women in rural areas. However, a severe shortage of qualified trainers, outdated textbooks, and a focus on agriculture to the exclusion of other science results in less than optimal implementation and significantly disadvantages those girls who have no other options.

-- Participants, no matter their field, uniformly identified a

strong supporter - family, teachers or mentors - as critical to their success. One of the high school students recognized the inspiration and support of her school administrator during her remarks at the workshop. A university student, who came with her professor, said that when the time came to choose between science and humanity studies, her family told her to pick the easier one because she was a girl; she chose science anyway. ESTOFF has heard numerous times that Indian parents believe a girl's duties and responsibilities to her family - current and future - are paramount, and so they try to steer girls towards less demanding careers that they believe would not interfere with those duties.

-- One participant observed that women need to be more assertive in marketing their contributions and benefits to their organization, and asking for what they need and want rather than expecting it to be handed to them. Other participants agreed, but noted that this goes against many cultural norms and may be a difficult behavior to change.

-- By and large, women are not effectively integrated into the professional networking organizations or the "water cooler" and inner circle networks in their institutions. This means they are both excluded from many decisions and are often unaware of the programs and opportunities available to them. Despite indicating they did not particularly enjoy this type of networking, participants strongly emphasized the need to be better connected with the larger scientific community, not just with women scientists, in order to achieve any equality.

NEW DELHI 00001874 003 OF 003

NEXT STEPS

15. Participants repeatedly expressed appreciation that the U.S. Embassy was willing to host a workshop everyone said was needed but no one felt they could host. While interested in taking action, participants were not exactly sure what that action should be, who should take it, or how they should take it. The U.S. is in a unique position to assist these women in creating a vision and strategy for implementing a campaign for equality. To engage a wider audience and increase awareness of this and other women's empowerment issues (REFTELS) in India, post brainstormed the following list of ideas for possible future activities. Post has not yet committed to any programs, and welcome Department input on these ideas and suggestions for other potential activities.

-- A roundtable lunch with senior government leaders in Human Resources, Science and Environment and key female scientists to discuss the situation and possible ways forward.

-- Inclusion of women scientists in a Women's Empowerment roundtable lunch with Ambassador Verveer during her November visit to India.

-- Sending a group of women, including women scientists, to DC for a luncheon with the Secretary during the summit with Prime Minister Singh.

-- Finding opportunities for the inclusion of women scientists in the Asia Women's Leadership Summit, sponsored by Vital Voices and the USG in New Delhi in early 2010.

-- Putting on a larger conference (possibly regional?) on Women in Science to coincide with International Women's Day in March 2010.

-- Implementing a Public Affairs campaign highlighting contributions women can and do make to science, including reaching out to American scientists in key positions such as Science Advisor Nina Fedoroff and EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, for press articles and public appearances in India.

-- Identifying professional scientific organizations in the U.S. for possible partnership with their Indian equivalents to focus on creating networking and mentoring opportunities.

--Planning an International Visitors Leadership Program for women

scientists from South Asia for 2010 or 2011.

ROEMER